DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 273 CS 213 340

AUTHOR Pytlik, Betty P.
TITLE Teaching the Teachers of Writing: Evolving Theory.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College English; *Educational History; English Departments; *English Teacher Education; *Freshman Composition; *Graduate Study; Higher Education; Teacher Role; *Teaching Assistants
IDENTIFIERS Babbitt (Irving); *Composition Theory; *English Teachers

ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of the graduate assistant grew out of the turn of the century need for larger teaching staffs. A debate was formed that still influences the way teachers are prepared for today's freshman composition courses. This debate arose from philosophical and methodological differences in English departments, which at that time emphasized a rigorous scientific investigation of language. Humanistic critics of this emphasis, especially Irving Babbitt, expressed deep concerns about how writing was being taught. Harvard and Yale held to competing programs which can be compared to the basic oppositions of culture versus efficiency described by Babbitt and Glenn Palmer as representative of English department factions. Generally, professors acknowledged that new teachers needed better training for the task of teaching writing, as demonstrated by Modern Language Association (MLA) questionnaires in 1900 and 1912. Several approaches to teacher training began taking shape in the early part of the century, such as the one at Harvard. Seven assumptions about teaching writing can be inferred from Harvard's first graduate methods course: (1) students in methods classes need to write; (2) the impulse to write must be genuine; (3) peer discussions of drafts are useful; (4) revising peers' work helps new teachers explain revision processes to students; (5) observing other teachers aids the development of teaching style; (6) new teachers need practice in correcting manuscripts; and (7) role playing can help new teachers to anticipate classroom problems. These assumptions are suggestive of the theories that have shaped the training of teaching assistants through the decades. (Twenty references are attached.) (HB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Betty P. Pytlik

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED345273

Betty P. Pytlik

Ohio University

CCCC, Cincinnati, OH

March 1992

CS213340

Teaching the Teachers of Writing: Evolving Theory

The phenomenon of the graduate assistant grew out of the turn-of-the-century need for larger teaching staffs and for better prepared high school and college teachers. According to Albert Kitzhaber, the first graduate assistant of English can be placed at the University of Michigan in 1894, where the weekly themes of nearly 1200 students were corrected by a staff of 4 full-time teachers and 2 graduate assistants (44). My brief history can not attempt to answer the question, How did we get from there to here? Instead, my plan is this: First, I'll discuss the debate that took place in the early decades of this century and from which TA training emerged . Then, I'll discuss some strands of early methods of TA training that are part of the fabric of today's teacher preparation.

The debate I speak of--put in the simplest of terms--arose from philosophical and methodological differences in English departments, where, "By the end of the nineteenth century," Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg explain, "college rhetoric in the United States had become freshman English, a one- or two-semester writing course focusing on technical skill in grammar and usage, paragraph coherence, and exercises in the modes of discourse . . . "(903). Knowledge, it was believed, "came from the sciences and from careful observations," and writers were "to record and transmit this knowledge with a minimum of distortion" [903).

The English departments' emphasis on rigorous scientific investigations of language angered

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

turn-of-the-century humanists, most notably, Irving Babbitt, who, in a series of essays published during the early 1900s, made explicit many of the themes that were current in the professional literature of his time.

The first was the tenuous coexistence of two departmental factions with seemingly insoluble philosophical and methodological differences. At one extreme was what Babbitt called the "philological mediaevalist," who was grounded in Gothic, Old Norse, and Anglo-Saxon and whose scientific discipline, Babbitt claimed, was "not conducive to ideas or the art of expressing them" (140). At the other extreme was the "dilettante," the assigner of daily themes, who "like the sophists of old, instruct[ed] ingenuous youth in the art of expressing itself before it [had] anything to express" (140-41).

The second was a dissatisfaction with doctoral programs that concentrated on factual knowledge at the expense of comprehending and applying ideas. As a result, the degree, Babbitt complained (and I apologize for Babbitt's and his contemporaries' exclusive use of the masculine pronoun), "[put] a premium, not on the man who has read widely and thought maturely, but on the man who has shown proficiency in research" (141). Babbitt was further annoyed by the departments' failure to prepare college teachers.

Acknowledging outrage over the poor writing skills of freshmen (and of graduate students, too), Babbitt was concerned about how and where writing was being taught. He questioned whether any direct method of teaching English, that is writing daily themes and original compositions, was any better than the drill in the felicities of style that for nearly two hundred years had been derived from the translation of the classics; furthermore, he believed that the poor writing skills of the students were the fault of preparatory teachers, who, of course, had been prepared by the departments that Babbitt was critiquing (200).

Glenn Palmer of the University of Kansas, in the first volume of the English Journal, elaborated on Babbitt's "factions," pointing out that Babbitt's "philological mediaevalists" and "dilettantes" were really the opposition of culture vs. efficiency. He traced how these two positions were represented by the approaches that Yale and Harvard were taking toward the teaching of composition--approaches that still haunt current English departments.

The Yale followers held "that the business of the professor of composition is to produce writers" and that the best approach to that end was to emphasize "the inspiration of literature, recognizing that there could be no literary production without culture" (488). They "would develop a few geniuses by the systematic treatment of enriching thought and broadening experiences" (488). This approach was weak, Palmer explained, because it ignored the practical needs of life by confining the material of its culture to a vague literary interpretation, and left "its natural field [English] to teach the student the art of seeing and the philosophy of thinking independent of their bearing upon language composition"(489).

The Harvardites, on the other hand, believed that their charge was to cultivate in the freshmen good language habits (488). That goal translated into painstaking drill in the writing of short themes, since the average freshman arrived at the university "with little knowledge of grammar and less of the organization of the paragraph and the composition" (488). The Harvardites "would train a class full of Philistines prepared for the everyday needs of democracy," Palmer noted, "by enforcing good language habits, and increasing expressiveness" (488). This method, he argued, fell "short because students look[ed] upon the study of composition as a 'stupid grind,'" and it created "an abnormal race of men colloquially known at Harvard as 'rhetoric slaves'" (489).

Palmer then admitted a trend toward compromise: "[T]he study of composition, whether

it begins with literature and works back to principles, or begins with principles and works up to literature," should develop in students a healthy spirit of investigation by opening to them [the appreciation and understanding of literature]" (489). At the same time, composition "should . . . regulate the field of their investigations by the needs of the democracy in which they live" (489). This compromise assumed that language was not an independent organism, but was immediately connected with life, not a system of rules, but a subject for investigation(490). Language studies, then, should not be the sole burden of the freshman composition teachers. They should be carried on in connection with psychology, philosophy, history, and kindred sciences" (490) because, he concluded, to make a great writer required the "concentration of all the forces of the university upon his development" (492). This view of writing as an interdisciplinary responsibility, as David Russell has pointed out, was common at the turn of the century.

John Cunliffe of Columbia University, a supporter of the interdisciplinary approach, believed that problems in teaching freshman writing stemmed from the artificiality of a system that set the practice of writing apart from practical ends. As a corrective, Cunliffe recommended that assignments be "practical," as they were at the Columbia School of Journalism, where themes were read twice, once by the subject area teacher and again by the instructor of English, "who goes over each detail as carefully as if the theme were originally presented as an exercise in English writing, and gives it a grade which counts for work in English" (599).

Cunliffe, of course, was not alone in believing that making writing more practical would help improve both the image and the value of freshman writing. However, many believed that an even bigger problem in teaching students to write was the inadequacy of teacher training,

caused in part by the emphasis on methods of investigation in most graduate programs. The situation was described most passionately by M. Lyle Spencer of Lawrence College:

> To me the most lamentable situation in English teaching is that of the young Ph. D. from some big university, trained in all the highly specialized knowledge of Shakspere, mediaeval literature, Old English, Germanic and Romance philology, and the rest. . . but with no adequate idea at all of how to conduct a composition class. . . . He himself cannot write readable English. His doctor's thesis was a conglomeration of Latinisms, Germanisms, sesquipedalian-worded sentences, and unrhetorical expressions. And when during his college course the head of his department took him to task for the unreadableness of his dissertation, he excused himself on the ground that he was thinking too much of *what* he was saying, and not enough of *how* he was saying it. But as a matter of fact he could not then, and he cannot now, write clear, forceful, graceful English. Yet that man is to teach the one fundamental course in the college curriculum--composition (117-118).

At the beginning of the twentieth century there were, then, professors who acknowledged that new teachers needed better training for their "real" task of teaching writing. For example, responses to a 1900 MLA questionnaire, referred to by Donald C. Stewart, indicated that the majority of the respondents favored the study of rhetoric at the graduate level. Some thought that future instructors in Rhetoric "should be trained in the methods of teaching the subject" and that "practical exercise in composition should be included in the graduate work, though several were careful to exclude that as counting for a degree" (740).

A later MLA study, conducted in 1912 by the Committee on the Preparation of College Teachers of English, asked department chairs if there was a need for special training to prepare

college teachers of English (20). Of the twenty-eight who responded, twelve favored either formal courses in theory or informal "apprenticeship" and supervision for students; nine opposed on the grounds that scholarship was all that the university should undertake to provide--"that a good man will learn how to teach by teaching"; and six declared that the college instructor in English should have liberal culture and knowledge of life, as well as training by intensive study. Several in both groups said that experience in teaching before taking up college work was essential (20).

In any case, George Miller of the University of Cincinnati placed the blame for the poor writing of undergraduates on bad working conditions--"too many hours, too many students, too many themes for the individual teacher" (120)-- poor individual teaching, and poor cooperation between teachers. To eliminate the last two evils, he said, "a change in standards for the selection and promotion of college teachers" was needed . . . especially in composition. . . . Appointment and promotion of teachers of college composition should be based upon the ability to teach . . . and not upon scholarship in literature and linguistics" (120). A graduate course in teaching methods would be the best way to ensure that writing teachers met departmental standards for retention and promotion. If such courses weren't feasible, he suggested, then carefully organized and well supervised graduate teaching fellowships would help.

Part of the resistance to formal preparation for graduate students to teach writing stemmed from faculty attitudes about writing. Donald C. Stewart (who studied the first twenty-seven annual MLA programs) tells us that, in general, faculty were interested primarily "in demonstrating that the study of English and modern literature was as intellectually legitimate and pedagogically beneficial as studying Latin and Greek" (734). The prevailing attitude toward composition was reflected in a 1914 MLA paper: MLA's purpose

was 'the advancement of the philological study of modern life and culture'; it was not "a teacher's agency nor was it concerned with pedagogical problems" (737).

However, in spite of these attitudes, several approaches to teacher training were beginning to take shape. The one that got the most attention was Harvard's first course for new teachers of college writing. In 1912, Chester Noyes Greenough described for the newly formed College Section of the NCTE Harvard's English 67. Half of the course was based on Greenough's belief that "[T]he chief requisite for success in teaching Freshmen to write is to be able to write everything that a Freshman would be required to write, . . . " (110).

Because, as Cunliffe had emphasized, the impulse to write needs to be genuine, English graduate students submitted to the class their theses and reports for other courses or pieces about outside interests. They also revised reports and theses from previous years.

The other half of the work in English 67 was about pedagogy in writing in the form of observation of actual work in English A; practice in correction of manuscripts; and practice in instruction by conference and by class exercises" (111). The assignments the graduate students were asked to complete are worth noting here because they target problems that continue to vex methods teachers today.

Each graduate student was assigned ten freshmen whose themes he read in search of errors which he recorded in a notebook. By classifying the students' errors each month, the graduate students could prepare themselves for their future classes, "carrying their notebooks with them, to go to their teaching with a kind of diary by the use of which they can ward off, through advice and explanation given in advance, a very considerable number of errors" (113).

The practice of critiquing manuscripts took two forms. First, the graduates exchanged their own themes to critique orally or by written comments. Second, in class, they critiqued

typical freshman themes.

As for practice in instruction by conference and by class exercises, graduate students observed classes of experienced teachers, wrote lectures for an imaginary freshman class which they presented to their classmates for discussion, and simulated the conference situation by going over with the course instructor the themes of the ten freshmen. These candidates for apprenticeships in freshman composition met weekly for informal sessions on practical matters like text book selection, and "the problems of cooperation with other courses to secure better written work" (115).

While some colleges followed Harvard's lead, most graduate programs continued to ignore the need for such courses. In 1916, in an address to the college section of NCTE, the chair of the English department at Ohio State University, Joseph V. Denney, addressed this issue, calling for two kinds of courses for those who were preparing to teach English to undergraduates. First were courses to remedy undergraduate deficiencies, like a course in historical English grammar to acquaint the student with the history of idiom.

Denney's second recommendation was to add "courses that [dealt] directly with the educational problems involved in the teaching of English and that [appealed] directly to the student as a prospective teacher" of Freshman composition and the first college course in English literature." The problems that would be investigated would be the specific aims, necessity, and content of the elementary courses; "the bearings of psychology on current practice; the order of topics; the best basis of differentiating students into groups for instruction; the use of the conference period"; co-operation among departments; the grammar question; oral composition; assessment (325). Students would learn how other institutions were handling freshman writing, and perhaps they would student teach. The seminar would be

led by experienced members of the department, especially those who directed the elementary composition and literature courses. Senior faculty would visit these classes at times, thus creating "a live interest among all members of the department" (326).

We know from personal accounts and our own experiences that many of the issues about graduate training programs that arose in the mid teens were never resolved and that it was another fifty to sixty years before graduate methods classes became the norm rather than the exception. More to my point here, however, are the early twentieth-century assumptions about teacher preparation that are with us today.

For the sake of brevity, I'll conclude with a list of the assumptions about teaching writing that we can infer from Greenough's first graduate methods course at Harvard:

1. **Students in methods classes need to write.** In the eighties and nineties that assumption has taken several forms. At OU, for instance, my colleague Mara Holt and I require TAs to work through the writing tasks that they assign of their students. In the graduate class, we discuss both the processes and the products of those assignments. When Frank O'Hare at OSU prepares teachers, his theme is "Write, write, write." And at the University of Texas, Maxine Hairston regularly offered a graduate course in the preparation of manuscripts for publication.

2. **The impulse to write needs to be genuine.** The journal is frequently a learning tool in methods classes, where the impulse to write stems from graduate students' need to reflect on activities in their composition classes and on articles and activities assigned by the graduate instructor. Marjorie Roemer, in fact, will be discussing her use of journals in a Teaching Practicum class at the University of Cincinnati.

3. **Peer discussions of drafts and finished products are useful.** Many

methods teachers follow Richard Gebhardt's 1977 advice and ask graduate students to critique each other's papers, and Robert Parker has suggested "Small, self-selected reading/writing groups to share their writing" for comments (414). (Incidentally, Anne Ruggles Gere has shown that writing groups existed at the turn of the century.)

4. **Revising peers' work will help new teachers find ways to explain the revision process to their students.** In my methods class, with a TA's permission, I duplicate a final draft of a short summary-response paper and ask everyone to revise it. Then, in groups of three, the TAs discuss the nature of the revisions they made and the processes they followed in revising the papers. Finally, the class convenes to hear a summary of each group's discoveries about revising.

5. **Observing the teaching of others helps new teachers discover and develop their own teaching styles.** I require new TAs to visit and report on their visits to a peer's class and a veteran TA's class. Following the procedure for class observation that Michael Flanigan outlined in WPA thirteen years ago, graduate students interview the teacher to learn what she was concerned about, observe the class, taking detailed, accurate notes of exactly what was seen and heard, and visit the teacher to discuss "what went on in the class and how what happened related to his or her objectives" (21). I like this procedure because it fosters non-judgmental discussions about teaching.

6. **New teachers need practice correcting manuscripts.** By 1966, when Richard Larson wrote about training new teachers how to write marginal and terminal comments on students' papers, most of us had left behind the line-by-line corrections of spelling, punctuation, and grammar required in 1912. Still, our new TAs want to know how to "correct" papers.

7. Role playing can help new teachers anticipate classroom problems. In a 4C's workshop last year, Shirley Rose and Susan Wyche-Smith demonstrated a different kind of role playing than the one Greenough described. As an experiential training technique, an exercise on analyzing a writing process, for example, requires a participant to role-play the critic of theory; it asks the participant to use critical skills and draw on her own experiences as a writer to evaluate the adequacy of theoretical explanations of the writing process.

I have concentrated here on only those assumptions about the teaching of composition that can be inferred from Greenough's description of Harvard's first methods course. Components of such courses are manifestations of theories of composing, of teaching writing, and of training teachers of writing. So the question that I hope to explore next--not now, our chair will be relieved to know--is, Given these assumptions and those that can be inferred from other course descriptions, what theories have shaped the training of TAs through the decades?

Betty P. Pytlik
Ohio University
Conference on College Composition and Communication
Cincinnati, OH, March 1992

Teaching the Teachers of Writing: Evolving Theory

The Debate

Babbitt, Irving. *Literature and the American College: Essays of the Humanities.* Intro. Russell Kirk. Washington, DC: National Humanities Institute, 1986.

Bizzell, Patricia, and Bruce Herzberg, eds. *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present.* Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1990.

Cunliffe, John W. "College English Composition." *EJ* 1 (1912): 591-600.

Kitzhaber, Albert R. *Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850-1900.* Intro. John T. Gage. Dallas: Southern Methodist UP, 1990.

Palmer, Glenn E. "Culture and Efficiency Through Composition." *EJ* 1 (1912): 488-92.

Russell, David R. *Writing in the Academic Disciplines, 1870-1990: A Curricular History.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1990.

Spencer, M. Lyle. "Discussion." *EJ* 2 (1913): 109-21. Response to C. N. Greenough's paper read before the College Section of NCTE, November 29, 1912.

Teacher Preparation

Denney, Joseph V. "Preparation of College Teachers of English." *EJ* 7 (1918): 322-26.

Greenough, Chester Noyes. "An Experiment in the Training of Teachers of Composition for Work with College Freshmen." *EJ* 2 (1912): 488-92.

Miller, George M. "Discussion." *EJ 2* (1913): 119-21. Response to C. N. Greenough's paper read before the College Section of NCTE, November 29, 1912.

"Report of the Committee on the Preparation of College Teachers of English." *EJ* 5 (1916): 20-32.

Stewart, Donald C. "The Status of Composition and Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1880-1902: An MLA Perspective." *CE* 47 (1985): 734-46.

Thomas, J. M. "Training for Teaching Composition in Colleges." *EJ* 5 (1916): 447-57.

The Strands

Flanigan, Michael C. "Observing Teaching: Discovering and Developing the Individual's Teaching Style." *WPA* 3 (1979):17-24.

Gebhardt, Richard. "Balancing Theory with Practice in the Training of Writing Teachers." *CCC* 28 (1977): 134-40.

Gere, Anne Ruggles. *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987.

Larson, Richard L. "Training New Teachers of Composition in the Writing of Comments on Themes." *CCC* 17 (1966): 152-55.

Parker, Robert P. "Writing Courses for Teachers: From Practice to Theory." *CCC* 35 (1982): 411-19.

Roemer, Marjorie. Letter to Practicum Students. University of Cincinnati, December 8, 1988.

Rose, Shirley K. Sample Exercises Using Role-Playing Strategies for a Course in Teaching Writing. San Diego State University.